

Chicago Tribune, March 14, 2008

This week the House of Representatives passed an ethics bill that created an independent office to field complaints and investigate the conduct of members of Congress. I voted for these reforms, but they did not go far enough with regard to Congressional spending earmarks.

Since taking office in 2001, I requested grants to help many programs in my district. My job is to fight for my communities and I do. Last year, I secured:

- A \$846,000 grant for the Waukegan Police Department to fight the more than 3,000 gang members operating north of Lake-Cook Road,
- \$335,000 for developmentally-disabled employment in Northbrook, and
- \$245,000 for economic development in the second poorest town in Illinois, North Chicago.

I strongly supported each request. But my job also is to fight for our country. There are some in Congress who abuse the current system. Increasingly, Congress approves low- or no-quality projects throughout this nation. For every grant to fight gangs in Lake County, the Congress approves a new "Bridge-to-Nowhere" or "monument-to-me" with little public benefit.

Should the taxpayers build a \$320 million bridge from a town of 8,000 to an island with a population 50? No. Should taxpayers foot a \$243,000 bill so that school kids in Berkeley, Calif., can eat gourmet, organic school lunches featuring "Comté cheese soufflé with mâche salad" or "Meyer lemon éclairs with huckleberry coulis?" No.

It is because of these abuses that I became the first House appropriator to enact a moratorium on earmarks until reforms are established that boost transparency, accountability and quality of Congressional spending decisions. I joined 32 of my colleagues including Sens. McCain (R-AZ), Clinton (D-NY) and Obama (D-IL) to back a moratorium with reforms in how Congress spends taxpayer dollars. Chairman Waxman (D-CA) and Minority Leader Boehner (R-OH) are among major backers in the House.

Many congressional funding requests are worthwhile, but some do not pass the laugh test. We believe key reforms should be put in place before another series of spending bills are written.

I hope my colleagues join me in backing a moratorium on earmarks until we can enact these reforms to improve how taxpayer dollars are spent.

--Congressman Mark Kirk (R-III)

10th Congressional District